

My battle to capture Dad's war

In telling my father's story, says Tom Carver, I found an unsung hero — and myself

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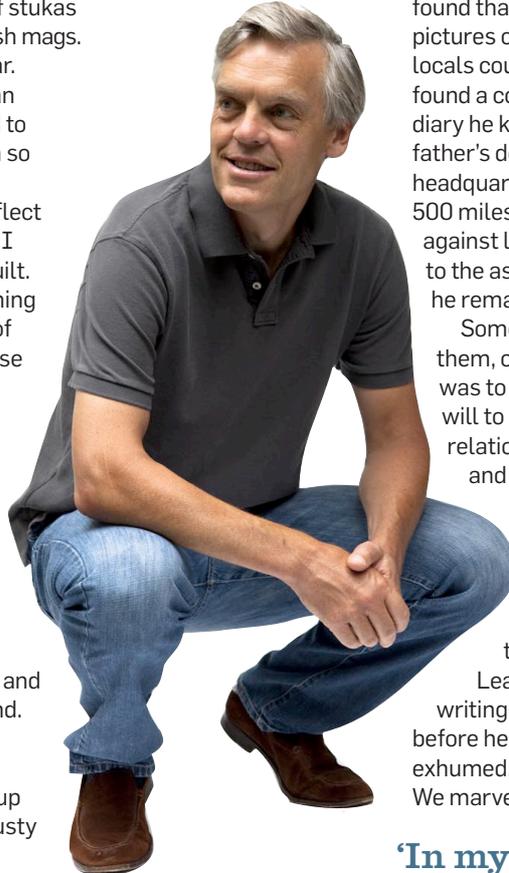
What I learnt as a child of my father's experiences in the second world war I picked up almost entirely by osmosis, listening in at the edges of grown-ups' conversations. Except for once, he never spoke to me about it directly. Maybe I didn't ask him, though I think that unlikely; like every boy growing up in England in the 1960s and '70s, I spent hours attempting to glue together Airfix models of stukas and hurricanes and reading Commando trash mags. I was transfixed by the whole idea of the war.

"Many others went through far worse than me," is all my father used to say. He seemed to feel no exhilaration at having survived when so many had lost their lives; in fact he seemed burdened by his good fortune and would deflect queries with an "Oh, it was nothing special". I suppose he was suffering from survivor's guilt.

His reticence may also have been something to do with the fact that he was the stepson of Field Marshal Montgomery. Monty's immense fame obscured my father's own military career and made him even more hesitant to mention his own experiences. On cold Sunday afternoons on exeat from my prep school, I would be taken by my parents to visit the great general in his retirement in Hampshire, where I would find my way down to his old wartime caravans at the bottom of his garden. Inside, I would lie on his old bunk that he had used at El Alamein, stare up at a portrait of Rommel hung there and imagine thousands of troops at my command.

When I was 11, my father unexpectedly took us on holiday to Italy. After obligatory stops at duomos and Donatellos, he pulled up outside a forbidding-looking building on a dusty road outside Parma. This was my old PoW camp, he announced. I remember trailing behind my parents and some stout nuns (it had since become a nunnery) as they tried to find the room where he had slept. Afterwards, he drove us to some nearby fields and explained how he and a few other senior officers had managed to hide the entire camp — 600 men — in a drainage ditch for two days and nights after they all escaped without getting caught by the Germans. Only much later did I realise what an extraordinary feat that was.

The older my father became the more fearful I got that he would die without ever telling us the full story of his escape, and I finally prevailed on him to write it down. He spent all winter in his study and emerged as the crocuses were blooming with just 15 pages. They were studiously unrevealing. The Italian family who hid him as a PoW on the run made several attempts to reconnect with him, including making a video re-enacting the moment they found him and sending it to him. He was always courteous with them but he never showed any inclination to go back to visit them in Italy. It was as if he was slightly embarrassed that he had



lived in a cave, dependent on the kindness of others.

In his final year, as his grip on reality weakened, the past began surfacing in incoherent snatches. I would sit, holding his papery hand and listening to him mutter in his sleep about being trapped by a enemy tank in a thick fog. He talked about putting up photographs of "those awful skeletons"; later I found that his troop had been ordered to post up pictures of Belsen in the nearby villages so that the locals could see what had been done. In his study I found a compass he made in the PoW camp and a diary he kept while he was on the run. I read my father's description of the day he reached the Allied headquarters in the winter of 1943, having walked 500 miles through German lines and survived against long odds, and how Monty cracked jokes to the assembled press photographers to ensure he remained the centre of attention.

Some people write about their parents to bury them, others I guess to exorcise them. For me it was to try to identify and label. It takes an act of will to get past that barrier of the parent-child relationship and to see a parent as just an adult and not your father or mother. But I found the process of writing created an intense feeling of intimacy; I discovered myself pulling out the few articles of his clothing I kept after he died — a tie, a jacket, a shirt — and burying my face in them to smell the fragments of Imperial Leather soap he'd used. As soon as I stopped writing, the door that had opened into his life before he was a parent closed once more. Having exhumed, I reburied him, grieving all over again. We marvel at the endurance of that generation and

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their capacity to absorb punishment without flinching, but those of us they left behind would have benefited from less reticence. Strong and silent are fairly useless qualities as a parent, I've come to realise. Recently, my nine-year-old son discovered I had been in the Bosnian war as a journalist. "What was it like?" he asked, semi-interested. Reflexively, I waved his question aside: there is nothing worth mentioning. I found myself comparing my experiences to my father's, how he had taken up a gun and fought against evil, yet all I'd done was to report it. Then I remembered how hard he had made it for me to find him. I was about to repeat the same mistake. So I took a deep breath. "I was once taken prisoner in Bosnia..." I said, and felt my son's interest start to quicken ■ *Tom Carver's memoir of his father's wartime experiences, Where the Hell Have You Been?, is published by Short Books on October 1, at £14.99*